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Committee on Conferences
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Draft report

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VII. Translation and interpretation-related matters

Introduction and overview

1. At its 493rd, 494th and 495th meetings, on 9 and 10 September, the Committee considered section VI of the report of the Secretary-General on pattern of conferences, concerning translation and interpretation-related matters (see A/63/119, "Demographic transition in the language services" (paras. 91-95), "Contractual translation and quality control" (paras. 96-100), "Impact of freelance recruitment on quality of interpretation at all duty stations" (paras. 101-105) and "Current and future vacancies at the United Nations Office at Nairobi" (paras. 106-108)). In introducing the report, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management said that the continuing exodus from Headquarters of competent and experienced language staff remained a cause for concern. The insufficient capacity of the Office of Human Resources Management to carry out the necessary recruitment processes in a timely manner was particularly worrying, especially given the fact that, once hired, new recruits required extensive coaching and training before they could be expected to function as replacements for staff who were retiring. The ongoing demographic transition within the Department could jeopardize the quality of services on which Member States relied. Accordingly, a number of steps were being taken to address the situation. Additional competitive examinations were being scheduled and an outreach programme geared towards universities had been developed. A number of memorandums of understanding had already been concluded with universities training potential language professionals. The addition of a departmental training coordinator had greatly facilitated the training and outreach programme, and those efforts would soon begin to bear fruit.

2. The shortage of qualified interpreters would have an adverse effect on the servicing of the Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development to Review the Implementation of the Monterrey Consensus, to be held in Qatar in November 2008, which overlapped with the United Nations Climate Change Conference to be held in Poland in early December 2008 and the final weeks of the

main part of the sixty-third session of the General Assembly at Headquarters in New York. In order to address that issue, the Committee was asked to request the General Assembly to grant a temporary waiver of the ceiling on United Nations earnings for retirees for the duration of the sixty-third session. A permanent increase of that ceiling would provide a more sustainable solution to the problem, but a more structural solution would be an extension of the retirement age to 65.

3. Representatives of conference services at the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna participated via videoconference in the 494th meeting of the Committee and discussed the theme of strategic workforce planning, focusing on outreach and training. A non-paper on that theme was distributed to members.

Geneva

4. The Director of the Division of Conference Management at the United Nations Office at Geneva emphasized the urgent need for concrete measures to address the difficulties caused by the ongoing demographic transition. While the Division had already participated in a number of outreach activities, including playing host to the forum of the International Permanent Conference of University Institutes of Translators and Interpreters, the ever-increasing demands placed on translators and interpreters often meant that they were unable to avail themselves of useful training opportunities or to share their professional expertise with educational institutions in the context of the outreach programme. In the absence of additional resources, that situation looked set to continue.

5. The most pressing challenges currently facing the Division were connected with the exponential and ongoing increase in the servicing requirements of the Human Rights Council and its subsidiary bodies. In particular, the documentation requirements associated with the universal periodic review mechanism were placing an enormous strain on the Division's resources. Translators and revisers were working under pressure to process documents, many of which were submitted late and in the wrong format; that situation had resulted in a further increase in the backlog of summary records. In that regard, it might be appropriate to consider, as part of the outreach and training programme, hiring university students to translate summary records under the supervision of staff revisers.

Nairobi

6. The Chief of the Division of Conference Services in Nairobi drew attention to the acute difficulties facing that duty station in the area of recruiting and retaining high-level language professionals. The shortage of such professionals at the global level, combined with a declining interest in postings to Nairobi, had exacerbated an already serious problem. It was therefore essential to increase the attractiveness of the duty station by, inter alia, adding a number of higher-level language posts. By offering 11-month contracts to translators and interpreters who had not yet passed the relevant competitive examinations, the Division was hoping to groom prospective new recruits and encourage them to stay in Nairobi. That exercise was limited in scope, however, owing to the need to ensure the highest standards of quality. In the longer-term, the "Africa project", described in the non-paper circulated to Committee members, was designed to establish contacts with educational establishments in Africa with a view to developing training programmes for language professionals, thereby contributing to the strengthening of Africa's

conference-servicing capacity. The ultimate aim of the project was to provide an adequate pool of highly competent university-trained language professionals capable of delivering quality language services to both local and international organizations.

Vienna

7. The Chief of the Conference Management Service at the United Nations Office at Vienna said that outreach included activities directed both outside the Secretariat and the United Nations system and within the Secretariat, as staff already on board provided a pool of potential additions to conference services in many job categories. He viewed the current staffing situation as a result of many factors, including the lack of interest among young people, especially with English as a mother tongue, in pursuing language professions, and the demand for language skills as a useful asset in other types of jobs, which limited the pool of potential recruits. In addition, many successful candidates in language examinations also lost to the system because of the slow recruitment process.

8. The Department should ask itself if its recruitment criteria should be adjusted to take into account current realities. As an intermediate arrangement, a bridge between unpaid internship and permanent or freelance employment could be created through the establishment of a traineeship programme in order to enlarge the pool of potential recruits. Some universities, especially in the English-speaking world, included in their curriculums such a period of "industrial attachment" for their students, and the United Nations could explore the possibility of becoming a receiving institution. The Organization could offer 11-month contracts to trainees with the potential to pass the competitive examinations. A relaxation of the rules governing internships could also be considered in order to attract more candidates. The model of the interpretation and translation training programmes formerly carried out in Moscow and Beijing could be followed, targeting specific language groups under a joint agreement between the United Nations and a Government or educational institution.

9. The Department could take the lead, in collaboration with the Office of Human Resources Management, in developing new concepts of workforce management. As an interim measure, testing and recruitment of language staff could be decentralized to allow duty stations to be given the authority to certify staff after a certain period of successful service on cumulative short-term contracts, perhaps two years. Such candidates could be given two-year fixed-term contracts in lieu of passing the competitive examination. The requirement of a second official language as a qualification for sitting the examination could be relaxed or dropped altogether, thus increasing the eligible pool of professionals.

10. In the area of external outreach, Vienna had made contacts with more than a dozen universities over the past two years. Internal outreach activities included specialized training on such subjects as trade law or outer space for translators and other conference servicing staff, library and linguistic support to all the Vienna-based organizations and calls for volunteers to staff outside the Department to service large conferences and meetings along with core staff to provide them with exposure to its work. Many such volunteers had expressed interest in joining the Department in the future.

Discussion

Geneva

11. Committee members expressed concern about the situation at the United Nations Office at Geneva. Some delegations, however, pointed out that a number of additional interpreter, translator and reviser posts had recently been established in Geneva. In response to questions regarding the impact of that extra capacity, the Committee was told that the Division of Conference Management was expected to service all meetings of the Human Rights Council and its associated bodies, including the three annual sessions of the universal periodic review mechanism, from within existing resources. The additional language posts referred to by delegations, many of which had not yet been filled, had been offset by reductions in other areas of the Division or were intended to be used for monitoring the quality of contractual translation. Accordingly, the Division had been forced to neglect its other clients in order to meet its obligations to the Human Rights Council. A longer-term solution to the problem was needed, and so a joint task force, comprising representatives of the Division and representatives of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), had been established. The report of the task force, which contained a detailed statistical analysis of the situation and recommendations for remedial measures, would shortly be submitted to the Human Rights Council.

12. The view was expressed that additional documents processing capacity would not solve the problem of late submission described in paragraph 71 of the report on the pattern of conferences. However, one delegation reiterated its support for the allocation of additional resources to ensure the servicing of the universal periodic review mechanism. On the issue of temporary assistance, concerns were expressed about the apparent difficulty of recruiting competent freelance interpreters in Geneva. It was noted in response that, while the Geneva freelance market was buoyant, the United Nations was in competition with other Geneva-based organizations and European institutions for the services of freelancers. It was particularly difficult to obtain additional capacity at short notice.

13. In answer to a query about the depletion of the rosters, the representative of the Division of Conference Management agreed that the situation was critical. Resources were needed for additional competitive examinations, since recent examinations had not yielded the expected number of successful candidates. Unforeseen events, such as the refusal of employment offers by potential recruits, further complicated matters.

Nairobi

14. Committee members expressed concern about the staffing situation at the United Nations Office at Nairobi and requested more detailed information on the reasons for that duty station's apparent unpopularity. In response, it was pointed out that Nairobi was classified as a hardship duty station (category C). Despite the financial advantages of accepting a post in Kenya, many potential recruits did not wish to subject either themselves or their families to the sometimes difficult living conditions.

15. Responding to a query regarding the comparatively high unit cost of a meeting with interpretation in Nairobi, the representative of the Division of Conference

Services clarified that, given the acute shortage of local temporary assistance, the additional costs were attributable to the travel expenses and daily subsistence allowance of internationally recruited interpreters. It was hoped that the Africa project, for which there was overwhelming support in Africa and beyond, would eventually increase the pool of local freelancers, thereby reducing the need to hire internationally. One delegation expressed concern about the uneven quality of freelance interpreters; it was pointed out that the use of interpreters affiliated with the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) served as a guarantee of quality.

Vienna

16. Interest was expressed in the proposal to establish a traineeship programme, which would be modelled on similar programmes in use in the institutions of the European Union. In reply to a question about quality control of contractual translation, it was reported that the Office had come close to meeting its ambitious target of 35 per cent for outsourcing, which should be offset by more meaningful internal quality control. However, it still lacked dedicated resources for quality control in the form of P-5 senior revisers, and thus had been forced to improvise solutions by hiring short-term senior revisers or assigning those tasks to P-4 staff. The weaker performance of freelance staff in some interpretation booths mentioned in paragraph 104 of the report of the Secretary-General was a matter of concern, and it was suggested that Vienna might profit from the experience of Nairobi, where the overall quality was considered satisfactory. It was pointed out that the technical subject matter of many meetings held in Vienna was a factor, and that, although performance of freelance interpreters might be weaker than that of permanent staff, it still met established standards. The view was expressed that the exhaustion of rosters and the demographic transition could have been foreseen at an earlier point, before the situation reached crisis proportions.

General discussion

17. The Committee reaffirmed its support for efforts to maintain the highest standards of quality in both translation and interpretation. The German Translation Service at Headquarters was commended for the excellent services it provided to Member States. Dissatisfaction was expressed, however, with the quality of interpretation from Russian into English. The Committee also expressed support for outreach to universities and schools of translation in all regions, especially in Latin America and Arabic-speaking countries. It also welcomed efforts to work with the Examinations and Tests Section of the Office of Human Resources Management to hold more frequent competitive examinations in all official languages to replenish rosters for language posts.

18. The proposal to waive or raise the ceiling on United Nations earnings for retirees in translation and interpretation as a way to ease the staffing shortage during the demographic transition was a cause for concern to many delegations. It could potentially set a precedent and could be viewed as giving special treatment to certain occupational groups. Furthermore, the demographic transition had long been foreseen, and other methods such as a more frequent schedule of competitive examinations should have been taken earlier. Raising the earnings ceiling was seen as a stop-gap measure, while long-term solutions were needed and could be found through outreach and increased contacts with educational institutions.

19. A representative of the Secretariat said that many successful candidates now on the rosters did not wish to accept permanent employment, and that such human factors as resignations, deaths and staff moving to other departments were involved as well. The distinction between language staff and other staff in respect of the earnings ceiling for retirees had been introduced by the General Assembly itself many years earlier, in recognition of the fact that retirees were essential in order to maintain quality, and that it was in the interests of the Organization to provide a different ceiling for retired language staff. In 2003, by its resolution 57/305, the Assembly had abandoned the practice of expressing that ceiling in dollars and had instead set the ceiling at 125 workdays. Action by the Assembly would be required for any waiver of or change to the ceiling.

20. The Committee also expressed concern at the situation regarding the servicing of the Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development in Qatar, which overlapped with the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Poland and the end of the main part of the sixty-third session of the General Assembly. The question was raised whether the use of retirees was the only solution to the problem, and whether the search for freelance interpreters on the international commercial market had been sufficiently thorough. A difference in interpretation of the legislative intent of the relevant resolution between the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Office of Human Resources Management was noted; the Office of Human Resources Management took it to mean calendar days, which included weekends, while the Department interpreted it as working days. Some 15 retirees would have reached the ceiling before the conferences were involved; if agreement could be reached on that interpretation, most of them could be employed during that period of heavy demand. A representative of the Secretariat stressed that the necessary conference servicing would be provided to the two important conferences, but that no reserves would be available for unforeseen meetings at Headquarters during that period without the use of retirees. As for the commercial freelance market, it was not the current practice to hire interpreters who had not passed the freelance test because of the need to ensure a sufficient level of quality in their performance. Some Committee members suggested including specific language in the resolution requesting that emergency measures be considered in this regard so as to ensure that the meetings were provided with the mandated services. The Fifth Committee would therefore need to consider the resolution in October in order to ensure that timely action could be taken.